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ABSTRACT

When asked to teach a newly-created course entitled "Women and Creativity," a woman who loved teaching was eager for the opportunity to share stories about women with a class made up primarily of women. The course proposal, course objectives, and suggested texts initially seemed so outlined in scholarly language that the concept of creativity appeared imprisoned. The first topic of discussion was to analyze the traditional metaphor of the creative process, the muse, and to investigate differences between male and female conceptions of creativity. This led to the discovery that for women, creativity often was a subversive act in which they found a freedom and a validity in deviating from traditional male constructs of the world. Discussion was followed by two assignments designed to help students discover that every discipline has a woman in it somewhere who has shaken the foundations. First, students were asked to write and give a report on a creative woman in their field of interest. Second, students were asked to work in teams, to research creative women, and to compile a small anthology on women and creativity. Class discussion during the rest of the course revealed a continuous return to three themes which also served as topics for essays: (1) the dilemma of woman as outsider with the double urge to fit in and to rebel; (2) the creative work of women produced by personal suffering; and (3) the creative sensibility of women which stems from their ability to transcend their own identities and merge with others. (KEH)

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On Teaching Women and Creativity:

Speaking From the Margins

When asked to teach Women and Creativity my first reaction was what a gift. It was the second year Women's Studies courses were being offered at my university, so we were still a bit breathless from having won the fight with an administration that balked at the idea, one dean saying, "If we allow Women's Studies, the next thing they'll be wanting is Black Studies." No need to comment on this. The course was a gift because although I had sat in on two women's studies courses, I had never taught the subject. As a woman who loves teaching I was eager for the opportunity to share stories about women with a class of primarily women. Also as a writer fascinated by the magic of the creative process, I found the chance to teach the course a gift of indulgence in a subject as vital to me as the air I breath.

Then came a moment's panic. How was I to teach creativity? What is creativity anyway? How is it different for women? I immediately read the course proposal which was submitted to the administration, found course objectives, suggestions for texts, but it all seemed so academic, so rational, so outlined in a scholarly language that imprisioned the concept of creativity in much the same way white traders took the melodious, powerful sounds of African names and Christianized them to make the logistics of slavery a little easier.

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I had objectives and textbooks, but I wondered still: How do I teach this course? But as I settled down as read the words of Alice Walker, Virginia Woolf, Adrienne Rich, as I looked at the art of Mary Cassatt, Kaethe Kollwitz, Louise Nevelson, I found I knew the answers to my questions.

As a writer I tend to see the world through metaphor. I can't help it. Rational prose can't evoke the illusive truths that a metaphor can, so I decided on the first day of class to analyze a traditional metaphor of the creative process. I said to the class: Name a classic artist, writer, or composer. They said things like Michelangelo, Mozart, Shakespeare. White men. On the board I drew a man at a table creating. I asked: Now, in the classic tradition where does the man get his inspiration? Answer: the muse. I draw a picture. The muse is female, illusive, fluid, half-clothed, in the clouds, waiting to be translated, put into form by the male imagination. Does the male creator have an audience? Oh, yes, the court, the church, the upper class that finances his creative endeavors.

Now where does a woman fit in this metaphorical construct of creativity? She is the inspiration, the muse, a half-clothed etherial muse that has nothing to do really with a real woman's life of nursing a baby, cutting up a chicken, sewing a quilt. I point out that in our readings about women and creativty we will learn that the "mundane" details of living are the source of a woman's art. She is her own muse, as

seen in the words of a 19th century quilter who says of her creation: "My whole life is in that quilt. All my joys and sorrows are stitched in those little pieces . . . They are all in that quilt, my hopes and fears, my joys and sorrows, my loves and hates. I tremble sometimes when I remember what that quilt knows about me."

One hundred years later Sylvia Plath says on the creative process: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am I am I am."

In reading interviews with male poets on the creative process I repeatly find metaphors such as "hunt down illusive truths" "seek out mystery" "wrestle" "take hold." I find a completely different construct when I compare these metaphors to a line by Virginia Woolf who says that "life moves through a writer the way water moves through the gills of a fish." Women who lose blood monthly, who watch their own milk flow, who feel babies take shape in and move from their own bodies know that the creative process in not a taking hold of something, but rather a letting go. And this is a constant underlying metaphor in teaching Women and Creativity. Letting go. A scary and strange idea in an academic building, a florescent room.

When faced with this task of writing this presentation, I went to my colleague, said, "I don't know what to say" thinking: How do I talk about creativity in a scholarly for-

mat? More relaxed about these things she said, "Oh Jane, just get up there and talk about teaching the course." I said, "But I'd like to make it something pretty," and I was immediately reminded of Grandma Moses whose first painting was on a fireboard in her house because she simply wanted to make it pretty. He husband came in, saw it, said it looked real nice, so off she went painting any limited flat surface she could find. A farm wife, she didn't have the means to to buy canvas, so she set about painting the insides of cabinets, drawers, the undersides of tables. A woman creating art in the margins.

When I told the story of Grandma Moses to my class, many students nodded. One young woman, clearly moved told of how when her grandmother died they found stuffed in the back of her dressingtable drawers crumpled pieces of paper where she had written poems, prose pieces, little messages of her fears, her pleasures, her griefs, her little wonderings. No one had guessed she had so much to say. Another student told of an aunt who wrote poems on the back of recipe cards. Another had discovered an attic full of her mother's paintings.

This is what happens in Women and Creativity. At the start administrators want a syllabus with course objectives, requirements, texts. Students want to know about quizzes, paper requirements, a definition for their notebooks: "Creativity is. . . . " The class begins with a structure,

an agenda. We're trained to be comforted by this. But after days of sitting in a circle, reading the words of Woolf, Walker, Rich; seeing the art of anonymous women, and known women such as Kollwitz, Cassat, Nevelson, Chicago; after discovering the innovative scientific theories of of Barbara McClintok and Evellyn Fox Keller, of Maria Montessori, Margaret Mead; after listening to the "different voices" of creative women, we find a comfort in escaping an agenda, just as creative women found a freedom and a validity in deviating from traditional male constructs of what is what in this world. Whereas Carol Gilligan legitimized a woman's different process of moral development in A Different Voice, in our class we learn to see and value a woman's different process of creativty. We learn that for women creativity has often been a subversive act as indicated by the gestures of Jane Austen who slipped her writing under a book when someone entered the room, of Charlotte Bronte who stopped writing to peel potatoes, and George Eliot who not only had to hide her name to write, but had to leave her work to nurse her father. Women have created in margins, and have found freedom in the margins. Similarly in our class we find freedom, find terrific energy as we explore the creative potential of women's lives. In this course anything can happen, but that's what creativity is. A willingness to let go, discover, let ideas find their own form.

But I have to come back now to my own agenda. I had planned to tell you about textbooks, possible assignments.

Books by and about the women I've mentioned are a great start. But every discipline has a woman in it somewhere who has shaken the foundations a little. I give two assignments to help students discover this. Students are asked to write and give a report on a creative women in thier field of interest: law, architecture, music, religion. In this way we all get a little "dive into the wreck" and find a treasure. Also students are asked to work in teams, to research creative women, and compile a small anthology on women and creativity. Another treasure hunt and both an academic and creative exercise.

In teaching this course I never know what story, what issue might surface in class discussion, but I have found a continuous return to three themes, and these are topics for varied and often emotional essays. We explore the dilemma of woman as outsider, of a woman with the double urge to fit in and to rebel and how this leads to a sense of divided self. We see this clearly in works of Walker, Rich, and Woolf. Also we look at how women have created work out of personal suffering, how they struggle to affirm life rather than give in to despair. Kaethe Kollwitz, Harriet Jacobs, and Zora Neale Hurston illustrate this. Finally we see how a woman's creative sensibility stems from her ability to transend her own identity and merge with others. Kollwitz, Mead, Woolf and many others illustrate this. For anyone teaching this course I want to say, yes you will need an agenda, and you will also need an ability to walk

away from it and listen to your students' stories. Often they don't know that they are creative, their mothers are creative. They don't know how to turn from their Webster's dictionary that says "Creativity is. . ." And it is your job to show them how to look in the margins for the meaning of women's lives.

In writing about the woman writer, Woolf says her first difficulty is technical. The form of the sentence does not fit her: "It is a sentence made by men; it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman's use." The same can be said of scholarly discourse and its application to women and creativity. A contemporary Swedish writer, Christina Hasselgren says that language doesn't suit the perceptions of children, that the words sit like stones in their mouths, stones so heavy and cumbersome, the child can hardly speak. The same can be said for a woman writer. In the creative act she spits the stones out so she can speak. I'm suggesting that the creative act is a rebellious act; I think it is. Women's Studies is also a rebellion, one permitted only when it's proposals are presented in trusted academic language. So my advice: subvert the agenda. Let the students risk all tangents; they have something to say even though they often don't know it, like that woman who crumpled her poems in the back of a drawer. Explore all the margins. Who knows what secret fury, joy and pain you'll find there.